

# Faithful & Afire

LCMS Circuit Bible Studies — 2012-2013

## Called To Be Christ's Witnesses

**Called to perceive by faith and to proclaim the unseen works of God amidst the things that are seen.**

### Participant's Guide

**Topic: Witnesses to the unseen work of the Holy Spirit, who makes us holy by delivering to us holy things.**

#### 1. Focus of This Study

The Holy Spirit is often identified as "the unknown God." Who Is He? What is his work and how does He go about doing it? What does it mean for our life as Christians that the Holy Spirit uses holy things to make holy?

So much of the conversation today is about generic spirituality. This kind of spiritualism is popular for many because it tends to be disconnected from the person of the Holy Spirit and the means of grace that He employs to give and work the holy things of God to the people. The popular belief in this spiritualism shows itself in the willingness of Americans, who seldom read the Bible or attend divine services, to call themselves "spiritual." Their "spiritual"ness is not dependent on God's chosen means for conveying the true things of the Spirit.

Jesus ties us down to His words, which are spirit, and through these, the Holy Spirit gives life (John 6:63). His tying down is also a freeing. We are freed from our own natural spiritual tendencies, which are toward death and damnation (Ephesians 2:1-3). We are freed from the burden of creating our own spirituality. God has made us spiritual people with the breath of life (Genesis 2:7) which is the word of God; full of the Holy Spirit and life. The Holy Spirit makes holy by using the holiness-creating means of the word and sacraments.

Contemporary "spirituality" evacuates meaning from Christianity by reducing the enfleshed actions of Christ, the God-Man, to human concepts and ideas. In the novel *Friends, Lovers, Chocolate*, by Alexander McCall Smith, the protagonist, Isabel Dalhousie expresses her amazement at a woman who strongly disbelieves in an afterlife. However, she can hardly match such strong revulsion with her own strong confession to the contrary: "We strove for God—or many people did—and did it really matter what form we gave to the concept of God? In her mind, it was striving after the good. And what was wrong with striving after the good in a way which made sense to the individual?" Isabel succinctly describes our deep desire to reduce God to an abstract term, "the good." God is not an abstraction or a conceptualization. Indeed such a conceptualization is a move not toward God but away from Him. Isabel is moving from God to the good, from the concrete and personal to the abstract and impersonal. Here God becomes just a construct of the mind, the mental projection of Schopenhauer.

This way of finding God is like those about to die of dehydration in the desert drilling a well only to hit oil instead of water. What is wrong with oil? Nothing, except it is not water. Reducing God to "the good" is like finding oil rather than water. Oil has its benefits and under the right circumstances is more valuable than water. However, when life is on the line, all the oil in the world will not help.

## 2. Scripture Search

Read Ezekiel 37:1-14. Note the power of the word of God to undo death and to give hope and life where there is none.

Read Acts 2. The Acts of the Apostles are also the acts of the Spirit.

Sanctification, the work of the Holy Spirit, is “word-work.” God the Holy Spirit uses the means of grace to create and sustain faith in the hearts of his people [AC 5 & 14]: John 15:26, Romans 10:12-15, John 17:20, Titus 3:5-7, Romans 1:16, and Luke 10:16. God uses the tangible to deliver the spiritual and they cannot easily be distinguished.

## 3. From Our Lutheran Perspective

The Augsburg Confession gives the work of the Spirit centrality in Article 5, whereby sinners receive justification through the means of the secondary instruments, the human preachers. See also Luther in the LC 2:37. The whole work of the Spirit is to sanctify, that is, “to make holy.” Review the explanation to the third article of the Creed in Martin Luther’s Small Catechism.

### **The Third Article** *Sanctification*

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

*What does this mean?* I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.

In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers.

On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ.

This is most certainly true. *Explanation of Luther’s Small Catechism 1991 CPH; electronic.*

LC 4:19: “Therefore we always teach that the Sacraments and all external things which God ordains and institutes should not be regarded according to the coarse, external mask, as we regard the shell of a nut, but as the Word of God is included therein.” The finite is capable of the infinite (Mark 10:27).

Discuss the role of the means of grace in the Spirit’s work. Has God “put himself into a box”? If so, why?

LOCATEDNESS and MEANS: God has tied himself down to tangible means (*media gratiae*). God uses tangible, fleshly means because he knows how we are made. Read and discuss the following in terms of tangible means:

Galatians 3:1-6

John 6:53-58

## 4. Points to Ponder

Discuss: the conflict between flesh and spirit that cuts a number of ways across the biblical revelation. Consider how the incarnation changes our views of how the Spirit goes about His work.

Are flesh and spirit brought together? If so, how?

In what ways is the Spirit’s ministry also a dividing of spirit and flesh?

Read Luke 1:30-37 and discuss the shocking specificity of the gospel proclamation found in the unseen work of the Holy Spirit conceiving in Mary, the incarnation of Christ.

This same Holy Spirit that conceived the Christ within the flesh of Mary so that he should become incarnate, puts the same Christ into us through Baptism so that we are put to death, conceived and born again of God (John 1). The Holy Spirit was sent from the Father and the Son to work in the flesh of all believers. How can we use the incarnation of Jesus Christ to help God's people see the same unseen works of the Holy Spirit in them?

To what degree is preaching Christ alone a true preaching of the Holy Spirit?

Discuss the list of meanings for the word "to make holy" offered by Matthias Flacius in his *Clavis Scripturae*. How can we see the richness of the work of the Holy Spirit in this list?

## 5. For Conversation

The Holy Spirit is sometimes called the "unknown God." Is there a sense in which the Spirit desires to do His work incognito? And if so, how does that affect our pastoral work in the congregations?

In what ways are the means of grace both a revelation and a concealment of God the Holy Spirit?

How can we live under this revealing concealment and concealing revelation? How does this relate to Luther's theology of the cross?

Some years ago, a young church member came to me after a Bible class with a quizzical look on her face and said, "Pastor, since I have been coming to Bible class here, you have talked a lot about Jesus." I was glad to hear that. Then she asked quite earnestly, "When are you going to start talking about God?" Suddenly I was not so glad. As patiently as I could I walked her through John 14:8-10 where Philip asked a similar question of Jesus. Given our theology of the Holy Spirit, how would you deal with this question?

How does the teaching of the person and work of the Holy Spirit relate to our teaching of the exclusivity of Christ? How does Christology relate to the person and work of the Holy Spirit? How does Christo-centricity relate to the Spirit's work in the church?

Author: Rev. Dr. Scott Murray  
Pastor, Memorial Lutheran Church, Houston, TX  
5<sup>th</sup> Vice-President of the LCMS  
[smurray@mlchouston.org](mailto:smurray@mlchouston.org)

GENERAL EDITOR: Rev. Mark W. Love  
[markwlove@gmail.com](mailto:markwlove@gmail.com)

## Bibliography

- CTCR, *The Charismatic Movement and Lutheran Theology*. St. Louis: CTCR, 1972.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Lutheran Church and the Charismatic Movement*. St. Louis: CTCR, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Spiritual Gifts*. St. Louis: CTCR, 1994.
- Flacius, Matthias. *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae*. 1674.
- Köberle, Adolph. *The Quest for Holiness*. St. Louis: CPH, 1982.
- Mahsmann, David, ed. *Augsburg Today*. St. Louis: CPH, 1997.
- McCain, Paul, ed. *Concordia*. Second Ed. St. Louis: CPH, 2006.
- Ricouer, Paul. *The Symbolism of Evil*. Trans. Emerson Buchanan. New York: Harper & Row, 1967.
- Senkbeil, Harold L. *Dying to Live: the Power of Forgiveness*. St. Louis: CPH, 1994.